

# *Field Report*

## Devil's Postpile National Monument

### ■ 1.0 Summary

Devil's Postpile National Monument is located high on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range near the town of Mammoth Lakes and the Mammoth Mountain Resort in California. The monument was established by Presidential Proclamation in 1911 to preserve the natural formations for scientific and public inspiration and interpretation. Devil's Postpile is a mass of columnar-jointed basalt, the remains of lava that flowed into the valley of the Middle Fork San Joaquin River about 100,000 years ago.

Activities at the monument include hiking, picnicking, camping, fishing, swimming, boating, horseback and mule riding, and other outdoor activities. Guided walks and campfire programs are also provided to visitors. Visitors currently access the monument during the summer months by shuttle bus operated by the Mammoth Mountain Ski Area. Ample parking for shuttle bus users is provided at the Mammoth Mountain Inn and Ski Lodge facilities area.

Shuttle buses generally operate from Memorial Day through September. The seasonal period of shuttle bus operations may extend if the weather permits. Private automobiles are also allowed to use the access road before 7:30 a.m. and after 5:30 p.m. during this summer period. Private vehicles can also use the loop road during the day if there are 11 or more persons in the vehicle. Private automobiles can also use the road if there are disabled persons in the vehicle, if the vehicles are transporting boats or canoes, and if visitors are camping and/or are guests of the Reds Meadow Resort.

The shuttle bus began operation in 1978 and operates at high and very effective level of service to meet the summer period demand to the Devil's Postpile. Even with this highly effective service, there is a need to enhance this alternative transportation system (ATS) by:

- Purchasing a number of additional buses to both replace older vehicles and possibly, to increase the fleet size. This strategy would increase the levels of service of the system to meet the expected future demand to the monument and the expected high levels of future visitation during the summer months to the Mammoth Lakes and Mammoth Mountain area.
- Integrating the Devil's Postpile shuttle bus service with the new local transit circulation system to be implemented by Mammoth Lakes should also be considered. Mammoth Lakes and Mammoth Mountain will soon implement a local transit circulation system to connect a variety of existing and expected attractions in the resort area. There is currently only limited local transit that does not provide comprehensive

route coverage or service levels. This new transit service will be needed to help transport the growing demand of resort area visitors in both the summer and winter months.

These potential enhancements would be designed to improve shuttle bus operations and services, move more visitors through transit rather than automobile use, and meet the expected increase in visitor demand to the monument.

## ■ 2.0 Background Information

### 2.1 Location

The Devil's Postpile National Monument is located within the Inyo National Forest along the middle fork of the San Joaquin River on the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada in Madera County, California (see Figure 1). The monument is south of Yosemite and north of Kings Canyon National Parks. The nearest town is the resort community of Mammoth Lakes. The Monument is some 17 miles from U.S. 395; 10 miles on S.R. 203, then seven more on a paved, narrow mountain road.

### 2.2 Administration and Classification

The Devil's Postpile National Monument is a unit of the National Park Service. The Park Manager is Wymond Eckhardt. The monument was established by Presidential Proclamation in 1911 to preserve the natural formations for scientific and public inspiration and interpretation.

### 2.3 Physical Description

The Devil's Postpile National Monument is a long, thin parcel of nearly 800 acres of federal lands. Several features comprise Devil's Postpile NM; the 101-foot Rainbow Falls, the Devil's Postpile itself, and Soda Springs. The Falls are located in the San Joaquin River's middle fork, at the southern end of the parcel. The Postpile is a spectacular lava formation made up of three to seven-sided columnar basalt formations that stand as many as 60-feet tall. It is located in the northern section of the site and is said to resemble a giant pipe organ. Soda Springs, just north of the Postpile formation, is a mineral spring. The monument's attractions are accessible only by foot and are served by the John Muir Trail and other hiking trails.

### 2.4 Mission and Goals of the National Historic Site

The site was established by proclamation by President William H. Taft on July 6, 1911 under the authority of the American Antiquities Act of 1906. Taft's proclamation states

that “the natural formations... are of scientific interest, and it appears that the public interest will be promoted by reserving said formations as a National Monument.”

## **2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile**

The Monument accommodates visitors from late spring to early fall and is closed during the winter months. August tends to be the busiest month of the season for visitation. Weekend visitation also tends to be higher than weekday with Labor Day weekend traditionally having the highest visitation.

Visitation to the monument grew from 87,300 in 1972 to a high of 158,700 in 1990. High levels of visitation in 1990 and 1991 (145,400 visitors) was due to the fact that the monument was open for a longer period of time due to drought. Since the early 1990s, visitation has varied from 119,000 (1998) to 133,900 (1993) persons.

From 1994 to 1998, 31 to 37 percent of visitors used shuttle buses to access the monument. Between 4,723 and 6,635 round trip shuttle bus trips were required to service this level of passenger demand. The level of service represents 10 to 15 minute frequency during peak periods. The remainder of the visitors accessed the monument by private automobile. Visitors primarily are made up of families visiting the resort area of Mammoth Lakes and Mammoth Mountain. The average stay of visitors at Devil's Postpile is between two to three hours and is primarily for viewing the monument and hiking. Some visitors stay overnight, parking at Red's Meadow and other attractions near the monument.

## **■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns**

### **3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns**

Mammoth Mountain runs a shuttle bus for day-use visitors to the Devil's Postpile-Reds Meadow area from late June to early September. If weather permits, the shuttle bus operates into November. Shuttle services operate into and out of Reds Meadow and the Postpile between the Mammoth Mountain Inn and Reds Meadow Resort. Bus stops are made at several locations including Agnew Meadows, Starkweather Lake, Upper Soda Springs Campground, Pumice Flats Campground, Minaret Falls Campground, Devil's Postpile Ranger Station, Stocher Lake, Reds Meadow Campground, Rainbow Falls Trailhead, and Reds Meadow Resort.

The shuttle runs from 7:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. daily with fares of \$9.00 per adult round trip. Round trip fares for teens (ages 13 to 18) and children (ages five to 12) are \$7.00 and \$5.00 respectively. One-way fares are also offered at reduced rates of \$5.00 for adults, \$4.00 for teens and \$3.00 for children.

Private automobiles may also use the loop road to access the Devil's Postpile if the following criteria are met:

- Eleven or more persons are in the vehicle;
- Disabled persons are in the vehicle;
- Vehicles are transporting boats or canoes; and
- Visitors are camping and/or are guests of the Red Meadows Resort.

The loop road from The Mammoth Mountain Inn is approximately 14 miles. This road is very narrow and in some locations, the roadway width does not permit buses (or other vehicles) to pass one another. Therefore, buses must pull over to the roadway shoulder to allow buses in the opposite direction to pass.

Mammoth Mountain has a fleet of 29 shuttle buses that can all be deployed if demand warrants. Typically, a minimum of four shuttle buses operates at any given time to provide service to the Postpile. The fleet consists of:

- Eleven Bluebirds accommodating between 39 and 45 passengers;
- Fourteen Isuzus accommodating between 23 and 35 passengers; and
- Three Internationals accommodating between 28 and 29 passengers.

Mammoth Mountain Resort has a fully operational and full service maintenance facility on its property. This facility is run by Mammoth Mountain and is used to service all property vehicles including snowcats, snowplows, shuttle buses, and other vehicles. Shuttle buses are also capable of carrying two bicycles. Animals are also permitted on the shuttle buses.

### **3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns**

Mammoth Mountain and the surrounding attractions and amenities (hotels, condominiums, and other services) in the Mammoth Lakes area are expected to grow significantly in the near future. The hope is that Mammoth Lakes turns into a year-round resort area. With this growth, Mammoth Lakes is evaluating the need to develop a new transit circulation system designed to connect Mammoth Lakes, Mammoth Mountain, the Red Meadows Resort/Devil's Postpile, and other area lake attractions. A shuttle bus serving all or parts of this area could contribute to local economic development goals by encouraging visitors to stay longer in the resort area and patronize local businesses.

### **3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns**

The Postpile was designated a national monument primarily due to scientific interest in its geological formation. The primary natural resource within the monument is a lodgepole pine/red fir forest. Wildlife is also plentiful and varied within the unit. The Inyo National Forest surrounds the monument. Lands in the monument west of the Middle Fork San Joaquin River are part of the Ansel Adams Wilderness. This River is also a state designated wild trout water. The John Muir and Pacific Trails pass through the monument.

Known cultural resources within the monument are limited to erosion-damaged streamline lithic scatters.

### **3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns**

Hiking is the chief attraction in Devil's Postpile. The John Muir and Pacific Crest Trail runs through the center of the Monument on its way from Yosemite to Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. There are numerous unnamed trails in and around the east side of the monument. They run chiefly north/south, from the campground, past Soda Springs, circling the Postpile itself, and continuing on to Rainbow Falls. King Creek Trail serves the west side. King Creek Trail enters the Park on the west side and heads north. It crosses John Muir and Pacific Crest and meets the other trails near Soda Springs. These trails provide the only access to the monument's attractions.

There are 21 campsites available on a first come first served basis. The campground is located in the northern end of the Monument near the ranger station. Biking is allowed on roads only, it is prohibited on trails or cross-country. Fishing is permitted with a California Angling license for persons 16 and older. No hunting is permitted in the Devil's Postpile.

## **■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination**

### **4.1 Unit Plans**

The General Management Plan for the Postpile was originally scheduled for completion in February of 1999. The GMP is still under development by the Pacific-Great Basin Support Office and monument staff. No major plans are underway to improve transportation services to the monument through this GMP.

### **4.2 Public and Agency Coordination**

Devil's Postpile is located in the vicinity of the town of Mammoth Lakes. Roadways accessing the Devil's Postpile are owned and maintained by the National Forest Service. The Mammoth Mountain Ski Resort provides the shuttle bus service to Devil's Postpile and other attractions in the area. In the opinion of the park officials, coordination is very good between these entities. There may be opportunities for the NPS to continue to work directly with Mammoth Lakes and representatives of Mammoth Mountain to improve levels of service to the Postpile to increase ridership, and to reduce bus fares for visitors. Near-term opportunities also exist to expand bus services into the Devil's Postpile and Reds Meadow Resort if Mammoth Lakes and Mammoth Mountain implement the new local transit circulation system.

## ■ 5.0 Assessment of Need

### 5.1 Magnitude of Need

Visitation into the Devil's Postpile has been fairly consistent over the past several years. However, there will be a future need to implement an ATS especially if plans by both Mammoth Lakes and Mammoth Mountain to create a year-round resort materialize. An ATS, or in this case, an enhancement to the current shuttle bus service into the Postpile, would ensure that additional visitation generated from local resort attraction expansion could access the monument by bus. This ATS should also be integrated with the new local transit service that will be designed by Mammoth Lakes to connect with a variety of area attractions not currently accessible by transit.

### 5.2 Feasible Alternatives

The shuttle bus began operation in 1978 and operates at high and very effective level of service to meet the summer period demand to the Devil's Postpile. Even with this highly effective service, there is a near-term need to enhance this ATS by:

- Purchasing a number of additional buses to both replace older vehicles and to increase the fleet size. This strategy would increase the levels of service of the system to meet the expected future demand to the monument and the expected high levels of future visitation to the Mammoth Lakes and Mammoth Mountain area during the summer months. At least 11 new "replacement" shuttle buses should be purchased to replace the older Bluebird vehicles with similar Isuzu shuttle buses. The new vehicles should carry up to 35 passengers. This strategy should also include the purchase of handicapped accessible shuttle buses to help move disabled persons and to reduce the need of disabled persons to use private automobiles for Devil's Postpile access. The total number of replacement and new shuttles buses to be purchased that can be determined by evaluating the Mammoth Lakes transit service plan (see below).
- Integrating the Devil's Postpile shuttle bus service with the new local transit circulation system to be implemented by Mammoth Lakes. Mammoth Lakes in conjunction with Mammoth Mountain will soon implement a local transit circulation system to connect a variety of existing and expected attractions in the resort area. There is currently limited local transit that does not provide comprehensive route coverage or service levels. This new transit service will be needed to help transport the growing demand of resort area visitors in both the summer and winter months as the area becomes a year-round attraction. The NPS should work with Mammoth Lakes and in particular Mammoth Mountain to integrate the shuttle bus services to Devil's Postpile and Reds Meadow Resort with this new service, including the purchase of new shuttle buses to serve the Devil's Postpile.

These enhancements should be designed to improve shuttle bus operations and services, move more visitors via transit rather than automobiles, and meet the expected increase in visitor demand to the monument.

## ■ 6.0 Persons Interviewed

Wymond Eckhardt, Ranger and Park Superintendent, Devils Postpile National Monument

Mark Cesena, Operations Manager Public Transportation, Mammoth Mountain Resort

Deborah Nelson, Recreation Ranger, U.S. Forest Service, Inyo National Forest